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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 004796

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DEPT FOR OES/PCI ASTEWART
DEPT FOR EAP/BCLTV MHIGGINS
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DEPT FOR IO/LAGON/ROEDER/BOOTH
DEPT PLEASE PASS TO NOAA DAS BREMMAN
DEPT PLEASE PASS TO OSTP/GWHITNEY/DIRECTOR MARBURGER
USAID FOR ANE/AA JKUNDER, ANE/ESA, OFDA
KATHMANDU FOR KOCH

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: CORRECTED VERSION: THAILAND'S NATIONAL DISASTER
WARNING CENTER PASSES FIRST REAL TEST OF TSUNAMI EARLY
WARNING CAPABILITY

This is a revised version of Bangkok 4777, correcting an
error in the timeline in paragraph 2.

[¶1.](#) Summary: Thailand's new National Disaster Warning Center (NDWC) issued a "Tsunami Watch" immediately following the 7.2 Richter magnitude earthquake near Nicobar Island in the Indian Ocean late at night on July 24. The "watch" prompted local officials to evacuate residents and tourists in some coastal areas. About ninety minutes after the initial watch was issued, the NDWC issued an "all clear." This first real test of Thailand's early warning system demonstrated a much improved capability than existed prior to the December 26 tsunami. End summary.

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Tsunami Alert Timeline

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[¶2.](#) At 10:42 p.m. (Thailand time) on July 24, an earthquake measuring 7.2 on the Richter Scale took place about 135 km west of the Nicobar Islands in the Indian Ocean, 665 kilometers west of Thailand's Andaman Coast. At 10:52 p.m., the NDWC received its first communication that an earthquake had occurred - in the form of an e-mail from the Malaysian Meteorological Agency. Within minutes, the NDWC received further information on the earthquake from its own computer systems monitoring the websites of the U.S. Geological Service, the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center (Hawaii), the Japan Meteorological Agency, the Europe Meteorological Service Center, and GEOFON of Germany, and Thailand's own Meteorological Department, which has inland earthquake detection centers.

[¶3.](#) By 11:00 p.m., within ten minutes of first learning about the quake, NDWC staff were notifying the Prime Minister, governors, local authorities, and Provincial Disaster Prevention Offices in six Andaman Coast Provinces by phone. At 11:10 p.m., from a booth located in the NDWC hooked up with a special link to pre-empt Thai television channels, Dr. Plodprasop Suraswadi, head of the NDWC, issued a "Tsunami Watch" on live television. Within the next hour, Dr. Plodprasop appeared on television twice more with updated information, including the estimated time, 12:12 a.m., of when a tsunami, if one existed, might hit Thailand's shores.

[¶4.](#) Although Plodprasop's announcement was a "tsunami watch" rather than a "tsunami warning," the governors of Phuket, Phang Nga, and Krabi Provinces (hard hit by last December's tsunami) took no chances. Three newly constructed warning

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towers on the beach in Phuket were activated, and the order was given to evacuate local residents and tourists to inland areas. In all, more than three thousand people in high-risk areas were evacuated. At least 5000 other people living along the coast fled their homes to higher ground as a result of the television broadcasts. Although one traffic accident with injuries was reported and one newspaper described the area as "chaotic," for the most part, the evacuations were orderly carried out and without incident.

[¶5.](#) At 1:20 a.m., after reviewing data on the websites that indicated the quake was caused by a lateral plate movement rather than a vertical plate movement (only vertical plate movements cause tsunamis) and after Thailand's single tidal gauge device detected no indication of any big waves, the NDWC cancelled the tsunami watch, and people returned to their homes.

[¶6.](#) In an interview July 25, Prime Minister Thaksin said he was "satisfied" with the implementation of the early warning procedures. According to Thai newspapers, local residents of the coastal area also feel the warning system worked

well, and that they feel safer.

Thailand's Early Warning System

17. Thailand's NDWC was opened May 30, five months after the devastating December 26 tsunami which killed more than 5300 people on Thailand's Andaman Coast. Supplied with \$750,000 worth of communication equipment from a group of American software firms, it monitors a number of international scientific websites and collects seismic data from numerous sources with an aim to send out a warning within fifteen minutes of receiving information about a possible tsunami. The NDWC has the authority to issue alerts on television without seeking prior permission from the Prime Minister or any other governmental authority.

18. The NDWC has three categories of immediate tsunami alerts based the Richter Scale magnitude of the earthquake: An "Advisory" is issued for earthquakes measuring between 5.0 and 6.9; a "Watch" is issued for quakes measuring between 7.0 and 7.7; and a "Warning" is issued for any quake measuring 7.8 or greater. The alerts can be modified or cancelled based on additional information received, such as whether the cause of the earthquake was a lateral or vertical plate movement or what type of wave activity is detected by tidal gauges. Thailand has one tidal gauge in operation near Similan Island and wishes to purchase additional buoys from the United States.

19. Provincial Disaster Prevention Offices, under the Ministry of Interior, in consultation with the provincial governors, decide whether or not to evacuate coastal areas, based on information from the NDWC. A large-scale evacuation drill was carried out in Phuket in April. Construction of 62 warning towers with loudspeakers to broadcast evacuation instructions is ongoing at various beach locations, but so far only three have been completed.

Comment

110. The first notification from Malaysia demonstrated a degree of international coordination that did not exist prior to last December. The NDWC mobilized with extraordinary speed, alerting local officials within 10 minutes and broadcasting a live television alert within 20 minutes of first learning of the earthquake. Local officials evacuated thousands of people and returned them to their homes in a relatively orderly fashion. Thailand passed this first real test of its tsunami early warning system - from detection to communication to evacuation - with unqualified success.

Boyce